

THE GUIDE
Brendan Gill

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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

THE GUIDE

Apr 21, 1945

He said, "Thanks for making me dance."

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"I've been watching you," the girl said. "You haven't danced once all night."

The soldier cracked his knuckles and did not speak.

"What do you think we came all the way out from Ashland for, to be stood up? Your lieutenant told us you boys were crazy to dance."

The soldier said, "That goldbrick's got no right to speak for us."

The girl's voice was husky. She said, "This is my first time here. What was it before it was a hospital, a country club?"

"A school. A school for snotty little rich boys."

"I've never seen such a place."

The soldier said, "Neither have I."

The girl hesitated. "I didn't mean to have it come out that way."

The soldier said, "Hell's bells, I got to live with it, don't I?" He was afraid now that the girl would go away. The orchestra had begun to play "The Last Time I Saw Paris" and soon another soldier, one of the sighted ones, might come up and ask her to dance. He said, "The C.O. says we got to get used to words like 'blind' and 'see'. He says we got to act like ———— thing was still O.K."

After all, he says, we're only one in a thousand. We have to keep in step with the rest of you." He had begun to talk about himself merely to hold the girl beside him, but, as it always did, his bitterness flooded over into what he said. "He has great ideas, the C.O. does. It was him and the lieutenant who cooked up these dances. They're supposed to give us confidence, like not using a cane, like learning to type and run machines and feed a bunch of lousy hens. It's to make everything seem dandy."

The girl said softly, "Dance with me."

The soldier shook his head.

"Dance with me. Please!"

"I won't." But his anger was checked by her voice, husky and pleading, and by his fear that she would go away. "I can't," he said. "I don't know how."

"You do. I'm sure you do."

"I haven't danced since last year, since we went overseas."

"I knew you could!"

"I'd go bumping you into people. You'd get knocked down."

"I'll take a chance." The girl's voice sounded close to him. She said, "You won't be cross with me if I lead a little, will you? Then nothing will go wrong. Then we'll have fun."

The orchestra was playing "Long Ago and Far Away." The soldier said sharply, "Fun!" but he held out his hands toward her voice. When he felt her right hand take his left hand, he placed his other hand in the hollow of her back. He said, "You're smaller than I thought."

"I am?"

She sounded pleased, and he said, "You feel like a kid."

"Say, I'm not as young as all that."

"I bet you're pretty."

She said, "Maybe we better try dancing. Everybody else is."

He took his hand from her back and ran it slowly over her face. "You feel pretty," he said. "You got a high forehead and little nose. What color eyes?"

"Blue. But you mustn't go thinking I'm pretty."

"I will. I can tell. And I like your mouth and chin." He held up his index finger. "Did I get lipstick on it?"

The girl laughed and said, "It's called Pink Ice. I'll wipe it off with my handkerchief."

"Don't." He touched his finger to his lips. "It tastes good." The girl tugged at his left hand, preparing to dance, but the soldier said, "I bet you're the prettiest girl in the room. I bet you are."

"Please," she said. "Please let's dance."

SHE led him slowly toward the middle of the room. The orchestra was playing a waltz. The floor felt smooth and reassuring under his feet. Now and then he stumbled and said, "I told you what'd happen, didn't I?" but she always said, "Quiet, silly! It's fun." After two or three dances, when he had gauged the size of the floor, he began to listen to the scattered conversations around him, to the sound of other soldiers and girls dancing, without being afraid that they would run him down. The other girls' voices seemed loud and harsh compared to his girl's voice. They talked too much about themselves and about the war, calling out to one another and giggling at the soldiers' comments. One girl kept repeating, "Stop it. Stop it. Oh, I'll die if I don't stop laughing." But his girl hardly spoke. Lowering his cheek to hers, he said, "You smell good."

She said, "It's called Apple Blossom."

"Don't keep giving me the names of things. I mean you smell good."

She touched his cheek with her fingers and said, "You're sweet."

"I was afraid to ask you for a long time. I stood right beside you, but I didn't dare say anything."

"I could feel your there," he said. "I thought maybe you figured I was some kind of a freak."

"I didn't!"

"I'm just telling you. That's why I was sore at first. I don't like people coming out here to the hospital, not even entertainers or Red Cross people. I don't like anybody being sorry for me. I like to be left alone." As he spoke the words, the soldier knew that they were untrue, or only partly true, and he was afraid that the girl would believe them. She didn't answer, and he went on hurriedly, "Only not you. I'm glad you came out here. I don't want you to leave me alone."

She squeezed his hand. "You're funny."

"Am I?"

"I mean, you're all mixed up."

He could not help his self-pity. "Maybe that's what stopping shrapnel does."

"We better not talk about that," the girl said.

"I don't mind."

"I think I'd mind."

The music had ended, and they were dancing to the sound of their voices. The soldier said, "The lieutenant told us there'd be refreshments on a table to the left of the front door. Between the door and the windows." He tried to keep his voice steady. "Ten paces," he said. "I counted it off before the dance. Would you like some fancy hospital refreshments?"

The girl said, "That would be fine."

She continued to hold his hand, guiding him and pretending not to guide him across the floor. The voices of the other girls and soldiers grew shrill as they approached the table. The girl said, "You wait here while I get something for us."

"It'll only be grape juice and cookies," the soldier said. "It's always grape juice and cookies." He imitated the singsong voice of a child reciting in school. "I've been taught how to fill my cup already. It's simple. I can tell by the temperature of the grape juice inside the cup how close to the top I'm getting."

"Please don't talk like that. I'll be back in a minute."

Ever since he had become blind, time had passed for him with painful slowness. Now, to keep from growing impatient, he counted the seconds—"a one and a two and a three"—between the sound of her heels clicking away into

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"Hey, Jack! Which way to the Stilwell Road?"

the babble of voices and the sound of their return. "One hundred and twenty-three seconds," he told her, feeling their fingers join as she offered him a paper cup. "Was one of those sighted sad sacks trying to wolf you?"

"Don't be silly."

"We call them our seeing-eye dogs. They have to lead us around the place for a couple of weeks till we get used to it. I don't want one of them wolfing my girl."

The girl said, "Nobody's wolfing your girl. Nobody's tried."

"Don't give me that," the soldier said. "The prettiest girl in the place!" When she did not answer, he said, "Come on out and I'll show you the rest of it. I heard somebody say there's a moon."

"Yes," she said, "we saw it when we were coming out on the bus."

THEY walked slowly toward the door. The soldier dreaded the raised threshold and the flight of narrow concrete steps beyond it. He had fallen halfway down the steps on the day of his arrival at the hospital and it had taken until tonight for him to find

courage enough to go down them unassisted. To keep the girl from noticing his fear of the steps, he said, "Did you all come out on the same bus?"

"Yes. We work in the same office."

The threshold was passed. They were nearly halfway down the steps. "What did you talk about coming out?" he asked.

"Nothing much."

"About how it would feel to dance with a guy who was blind?"

"Of course not."

They had reached the bottom step. "You must have."

"We didn't!"

For the first time, the soldier laughed. "We're practically fighting, aren't we? It's like we've been married for years."

The girl said, "I ought to say you started it. Then you'd say, no, I started it. Then we'd be ready to throw things."

"You know what?" the soldier asked. "I feel good. Right now, right this second, I feel good."

The girl pressed his hand. "So do I." "Is there still a moon?"

"Yes. Over there." She added quickly, "Toward the mountain, I mean."

"What kind of a moon is it?"

"It's past full, but it's big and bright."

"Does it light up the valley?"

"There's a fog in the valley. The moon lights up the fog and makes it look like a lake."

The soldier nodded. "There's a fog down there every morning. One of the sighted guys was saying it was on account of the river. It's a pretty big river, isn't it?"

"I guess so. It looks big to me."

"Well, how wide is it?"

The girl said, "I never know how big anything is in feet or inches."

The soldier said, "When you come out to the dance next week, you better be able to tell me just how big that river is. I want to know all about it, where it starts and what towns it flows through, and where it ends. The works." Then he said, "You are coming out to the dance next week, aren't you?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

"You got to come."

"You might not want me to come by next week," the girl said.

They had reached the end of the gravel path. Now they turned and began to retrace their steps. The air felt cold on their faces. The soldier said, "Don't talk crazy. Of course I want you to come."

The girl said, "But you don't know what I'm like, what I'm really like. During the week you'll be talking with the other soldiers, with the sighted ones, and maybe you'll change your mind. Maybe you'll want to try dancing with somebody else." Her voice sounded faint and unsure, as if it were she who was afraid, not him.

The soldier said, "Listen, you're the first girl I could talk to since I've been in this place." The words were almost too simple for him to say, but he had to say them. "You're good for me, damn it. I want you to be here as much as you can. I'll tell the C.O. to make you come."

From the number of paces they had walked, the soldier guessed that they were nearly back to the flight of steps before the girl said, "All right, then. You won't need to bother the C.O." "Promise?"

"Cross my heart." She took his hand and set it against her dress, tracing, with one finger, a cross on the ridge of his knuckles. "You see?"

"Yes," the soldier said. "I see."

They walked toward the door. The long flight of concrete steps, the soldier thought, then the raised threshold and the level floor. It would not be easy, but he would show her the way.

—BRENDAN GILL

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